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ABSTRACT

If communicative competence is defined by and organized around culturally-framed and linguistically-patterned communicative plans and goals and the linguistic resources of interactive practices, then interaction in the classroom is employed to create social engagement in regularly occurring interactive practices where communicative learning can be realized. The critical property in foreign language learning, therefore, is an environment where social interaction helps learners construct frameworks of interaction and participation. The purpose of this paper is to offer two projects for Spanish language learners that serve as a vehicle for creating these interactive practices where communicative competence is exercised. The two projects are called "Language Learners as Ethnographers" and "Language Learners as Co-playwrights." The target learners are adults of intermediate or adult Spanish. Both projects provide cognitive demands designed to appeal to adults, are collaborative in nature, and employ the whole language approach. It is essential that learner interaction be meaningful interaction. Not all group work creates equally useful or productive interaction. The projects described here put students to work doing something appropriate to their interests and level of skill, maturity, and life experience. A literature review and extensive scholarly references are included into the fabric of the article. (KFT)

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Introduction

In the past few decades anthropological linguists have begun to reconsider the social dimension of language, a dimension generally left unexplored by objectivist linguists who tend to examine language as an isolated entity. The paradigm proposed by some contemporary language theorists suggests that it is the communicative function of language that should be highlighted and that language should not be examined in a vacuum. With this focus, Canale and Swain (1980) clarified the definition of "communicative competence" as an essential aspect of language learning: in addition to grammatical competence, language learners must also acquire discourse competence, strategic competence, and sociolinguistic competence.[1] The notion of communicative competence has claimed increasing application in the foreign language classroom; its implementation is characterized by strong emphasis on interaction, either between peers or between students and teachers.

Why is interaction important to language learning? According to interactionists, social interaction is the generative context for language literacy and mastery; ultimately it is "an instrument to attain new forms of dialogue: (Ramirez, 1994:306). Bruner (1983) refers to interaction as a "Language Acquisition Support System" (LASS), arguing that it is through the intimate interplay between the innate LAD (Language Acquisition Device) and the acquired LASS that persons, as infants, are made able to enter the linguistic community (Bruner, 1983).

If communicative competence is defined by and organized around culturally-framed and linguistically-patterned communicative plans and goals and the linguistic resources of interactive practices (Hall, 1993), interaction as implemented in the language classroom is employed to create social engagement in regularly occurring interactive practices where communicative learning can be realized (Hall, 1996). Based on this view, the critical property in the foreign language classroom is an environment where social interaction helps learners construct frameworks of interactive practices and provides models of competent participations so that new forms of dialogue can be attained.

The purpose of this paper is to offer two projects for Spanish language learners which serve as a vehicle for creating interactive practices where communicative competence is exercised. The two projects are named respectively 'Language Learners as Ethnographers' and 'Language Learners as Co-playwrights.' The target learners are adults of intermediate or advanced Spanish. Although there already exist numerous language learning activities designed for younger learners, adult learners very often find that classroom activities do not correspond to their intellectual level. In response to this concern, the two projects described below provide cognitive demands designed to appeal to the adult learner population. The projects are collaborative in nature; group achievement is expected to be a collective outcome of contribution to and support of individuals who belong to a team — a "community of learning." Additionally, the projects employ the 'whole language' approach, which holds that language and culture are inextricably bound together and that the learner is to be seen as a whole person in a sociocultural setting. Thus, the language learning experiences resulting from the projects parallel experience from cultural investigation. Essentially, the activities required for the tow projects are carried out through "meaningful interaction" among individuals. Before the projects themselves are described in detail, it will be necessary to illustrate the theoretical background in which the projects are framed.

Theoretical Background

As noted above, the role that social interaction plays in foreign language acquisition has been referred to as LASS (Bruner, 1983). It is believed that through "negotiation" or "modified interaction" language acquisition can be greatly enhanced (Pica, 1994). The underlying premise is that the transmission of a message, as language input, is seen as an "encoding-decoding" process (Donato, 1994). In other words, language input is like a parcel having an air-tight wrapping and well-sequenced linguistic elements as contents; it is expected that this package will be unwrapped by the receiver with no alteration whatsoever to the contents. The interpersonal passage is like a

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conduit through which input is delivered, triggering in the receiver's mind the black box that makes all learning and acquisition possible.

This view, however, is deemed by sociocultural researchers to be an oversimplified understanding of human communication. Discontented with the "encoding-decoding" message model of information processing theory, researchers have looked to other disciplinary areas for a more holistic endorsement of social interaction in relation to language learning. The result is a growing interest in the sociocultural approach, based principally on Vygotskian theory regarding the social origin of intrapersonal mental development. This theory has found well-grounded application in the study of foreign language acquisition as well. It contends that language learning is rooted in social verbal interaction, chiefly through the target language.

The Vygotskian approach to language learning

According to Vygotsky (1983), the self is not an isolated and self-contained entity that behaves independently of the forces of its social environment; therefore, intrapersonal development can be traced back to the interpersonal dimension. For Vygotsky, it is through dialogic interaction that development occurs; thus the social context itself becomes the focus of learning. Thought, like all higher order mental functions, develops first in social interaction, prior to its appropriation by individuals. Development take place through guided interactions within an individual's "zone of proximal development," the distance between the one's actual development level, independent of assistance, and the potential development characterized by assisted performance (Lantolf & Appel, 1994).

It is through dialogue that individuals guide and shape the actions of others and, ultimately, themselves, because any function in an individual's development appears twice — first on the social interpersonal plane and then on the intrapsychological plane (Wertsch, 1985). According to Wertsch (1991), Vygotsky understands that an individual's world knowledge is a product of his/her interaction with the world. That is, individual development originates from the social plane. Inspired by Vygotsky, Donato and Lantolf (1990:84) proceed to suggest that second (foreign) language acquisition "is not simply the learning/acquisition of a second linguistic system but is development through a second language." Based on this perspective, the tow projects described in this paper make their cognitive and metacognitive demands on learners through the communicative use of the target language, Spanish, and all tasks are carried out in groups—the community of learning.

Collaboration in the Community of Learning

The strength of collaborative learning has been widely discussed. The metacognitive and metalinguistic advantages resulting from collaboration are especially characterized by the phenomenon of "collective scaffolding," as defined by Donato (1994). Scaffolding is a process by which learners provide guided support to one another during collaborative (foreign language) interaction. Therefore, if a learner's linguistic environment is a major contributor to his/her development (Hall, 1996) and meaning is constructed between individuals and their learning environment, learning will be fostered in an environment of social interaction. Groups are by no means just a convenient way to accumulate individual knowledge about other group members; through activities as effective vehicles for learning, group members gain insights and find solutions that would not come to them otherwise (Hall, 1996).

Task and activity

Although students are expected to grow cognitively through collaborative learning, it is unfortunate that not all group tasks are equally beneficial. Kinginger (unpublished) has demonstrated that tasks to which students do not personally relate do not generate authentic and meaningful discourse. Without authenticity, communicative competence can not be expected to improve (Hall, 1996), even though learners do participate in collaborative tasks. For the purpose of the present discussion, it is important to distinguish "task" from "activity." Vygotsky's Activity Theory, which analyzes the "why," what" and "how" of an activity, will help to make the differentiation. A "task" is a "behavioral blueprint" for social action imposed on learners from without in order to elicit linguistic production.; An "activity," in contrast, comprises the actually produced behavior and refers to the process, as well as the outcome, of a task examined in its sociocultural context (Coughlan & Duff, 1994). That is, participants of a task have their own objectives and those of the teacher, negotiating explicitly or implicitly. Therefore, the Activity Theory proposes that each realization of a task is unique and dependent on the goals and

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actions of participants, that is, on how participants interpret the task and why they perform it (Coughlan & Duff, 1994). Activity is defined in terms of sociocultural settings in which collaborative interaction, intersubjectivity, and assisted performance occur (Donato & McCormick, 1994:455). In other words, the task-designer, notably the teacher, must take into account the factors involved with contextualization so that the task will become a meaningful activity for learners and authentic verbal interaction can be elicited.

Collaboration in a Whole Language Classroom

In light of the "Community Language Learning" model (Curran, 1976), which calls for interactive and experiential learning, educators are reminded that true human learning is both cognitive and affective; a learner should be seen as a 'whole person,' a holistic social being, instead of a message processing mechanism. Learning take place in a communicative situation where teachers and learners are involved in an interaction in which both experience a sense of their own wholeness (Curran, 1976). Furthermore, the philosophy of whole language suggests that language is a sociocultural artifact and that language users/learners be seen as a whole. As a result, language learning is seen as an integral and inseparable aspect of sociocultural practice, which implies emphasis on "comprehensive understanding involving the whole person rather than merely 'receiving' a body of factual knowledge about the world" (Lave & Wenger, 1991:33).

By using authentic text, a whole language approach incorporates a cultural and a human component in meaningful activities in which students use the target language to interact with the teacher or peers (Adair-Hauck, 1996). Additionally, learning is viewed from a whole language perspective as a thinking, reflecting and evaluating process. This view certainly mirrors the aforementioned assertion by Donato and Lantolf (1990) that language learning is a metacognitive development through the target language. Thus, meaningful and contextualized whole language activities are created for learners to be actively engaged in before they have mastered all requisite skills (Donato & Adair-Hauck, 1992). In a whole language classroom, the whole is always viewed as being greater than the sum of its parts, and it is the whole that gives meaning to its parts (Freeman & Freeman, 1992). Therefore, the target language in the classroom is not learned in isolation but rather in context.

Moreover, a whole language approach emphasizes the collaborative nature of language construction. Freeman and Freeman (1992:7), state that "learning takes place as groups engage in meaningful social interaction." In a whole language classroom students are encouraged to work in participator groups during activities because a whole language approach emphasizes meaning-making and the interpersonal nature of language and literacy. Besides, whole language activities create great occasions for addressing cultural nuances and implications within the context of an authentic text. Essentially, the ultimate goal of language instruction is not only to develop language skill but also to help learners claim their humanity through the use of language (Adair-Hauck, 1996)

Through the use of culturally authentic text, including videos and movies, learners have the opportunity to identify with characters who have to cope with common human conflicts and problems for which they seek a solution (Adair-Huack, 1996). A task that incorporates authentic texts from which students can develop empathy can easily lead students to relate to the "blueprint" personally. Thus, this "task" with instructional objectives will be carried out as an "activity" from which students can derive meaning by way of interactional participation. Within whole language activities students set goals and become active participants. Essentially, whole language activities create occasions for social interactions that are embedded in meaningful contexts. The advantages of collaborative learning justify the use of group work or social interaction in the foreign language classroom; furthermore, the whole language approach helps to derive meaningfulness and authenticity form a contextualized interaction.

The following two projects are grounded in this notion of "meaningful interaction." The language learners become language users who use the target language to solve problems generated by the tasks. Each student in a group becomes an active member of his/her community of learning. His/Her contribution is deemed important to and will be shaped by the rest of the community.

The Two Projects

The two projects were originally designed for an intermediate level Spanish class at Carlow College, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The first pro-

ject was originally inspired by Hashemipour (1995), who suggests using a video of the film *Como agua para chocolate* based on the novel of the same name by Laura Esquivel, as authentic text. The second project is a continuation of the first. While these two projects set the global goal, there are also several subsidiary tasks that need to be accomplished in order to implement the projects in class. Two two-hour sessions are recommended for each project; relevant subtasks can be carried out in previous class sessions.

Language Learners as Ethnographers

(For the procedure of implementing this task, see Appendix 1.)

As Hashemipour (1995:168) points out, in order "to actualize abstract conceptualization and active experimentation, the student who hopes to advance linguistic and cultural proficiency must have the opportunity to connect experientially based knowledge with passive knowledge of history, economics, sociology, and language." She thereby highlights the view that education should be not only a continuous accumulation of book knowledge, but also a function of experience connecting what one reads with ongoing observations and experiences (Kolb, 1984). From this perspective, language researchers (e.g. Byram, 1989) have advocated the model of "language learner as ethnographer."

The intent of this model is to raise learners' awareness of innate observational skills (Hashemipour, 1995). When a language learner is compared to an ethnographer, the learner is expected to learn to explore the target language, culture and its people, and to cope cognitively and affectively with the new experience. Ethnographic strategies and skills guide learners to systematically analyze their own world view in order to develop and empathetic attitude toward another culture. From this perspective, the learner presents himself as someone who learns language and culture as a whole in order to describe and understand the people in question (Byram & Esarte-Sarries, 1991). Interestingly, these attributes are those a whole language learner is expected to have.

This project is collaborative in nature. Learners are engaged in a group task where the contribution of one may complement that of another. As a result, the process is one of using the target language, with the assistance of "collective scaffolding," to co-construct a team ethnography which could not otherwise be accomplished by a single individual at the intermediate level of Spanish proficiency. Essentially, this task becomes a "real-world" problem-solving activity. Furthermore, the project is expected to optimize opportunities for sociolinguistic practice and cultural investigation. That is, learners are guided toward a cross -cultural view that enhances their understanding of how linguistic interaction reflects social and group membership.

Language Learners as Co-playwrights

(For the procedure of implementing this project, see Appendix 2:

Compared to the previous project, the second is more output-oriented. Swain (1995) points out that L2 "output hypothesis" refers only to language production, but since in a whole language classroom language and culture are seen as a whole, her hypothesis can also be employed in an even broader sense which incorporates the aspect of culture. While producing a playlet with its background set in the target culture, learners as playwrights will immediately notice that their knowledge of the culture is insufficient. Next, learners as playwrights will need to verify their inner hypotheses about the culture by consulting with native speakers or cultural sources for accurate cultural information and artifacts required by the play. Thirdly, they may arrange group meetings where, in addition to metalinguistic activities, they engage in talk about the cultural credibility of the script.

With respect to the language output, this project requires a great amount of speaking and writing in the target language. In addition, the ability to produce socially interactive language involves the socially and situationally appropriate use of language forms and the knowledge of how to communicate effectively within the cultural domains of a language (Hashemipour, 1995). Through the collective construction of the play, the learners create a shared situational context for instructional communication because this situated metacognitive activity is carried out in conjunction with others (Hall, 1996).

Further Discussion

What students learn to do in a foreign language classroom is determined, to a great extent, by what is made available to them in the class environment. A beneficial environment is largely attributable to instructional activities, such as the

two projects presented in the paper, brought into the classroom by the teacher. Pedagogical tasks are successful only when learners can relate to them personally in the context of learning and when they are able to engage the learners in authentic communicative practice. Only then are instructional tasks integrated and meaning-centered rather than fragmented and meaningless (Adair-Hauck & Donato, 1994). For meaningful interaction to occur and for learners to move from mere compliance to personal engagement, they must be given the opportunity to relate to tasks in a way that enables them to establish goals that they feel necessary. Moreover, instructional tasks should be more concerned with the ways that learners interact with the language than the outcomes of language use. "Tasks therefore draw their authenticity and meaningfulness from learners who believe that what they are doing is real, is under their own control, and is worth pursuing" (Brooks & Donato, 1994:272).

Moreover, Brooks and Niendorf (as cited in Brooks & Donato, 1994:272) claim that if learners are allowed to participate in successive, analogous problem-solving tasks that they can jointly construct, learners can continue to become learning environments for one another. An outcome is an increased sensitivity and ability to analyze linguistic and paralinguistic cues that are essential to the acquisition of socially interactive language (Hashemipour, 1995). Within the environment of "intersubjectivity" (Rommetveit, 1979), a shared social reality and joint perspective on the task is established through speaking. This is the strength of reciprocity in the community of learning that is expected of activities like those suggested by the two projects.

Essentially, the role that the teacher plays in a classroom where activities like these two projects are implemented is far from a "depositor of knowledge." Instead, the teacher is viewed as a reflective problem-solver and mediator; the teacher is one "who guides students to observe, activate prior knowledge, represent information, select strategies, construct meanings, monitor understanding, assess strategy use, organize and relate ideas and extend learning" (Adair-Hauck & Donato, 1994:535). In addition, the teacher needs to create a "social context" which assists and supports the learners as they participate in activities that they would be unable to do alone or unassisted. As the learners are engaged in group interaction, the teacher serves as an observer/facilitator for the various groups by providing assistance when necessary. It is important that the teacher know the learners well enough to understand the knowledge and expectations they bring to the classroom; only then can the teacher design tasks that will serve as meaningful behavioral blueprints that will have both cognitive and affective appeal.

Voices from the Teacher and Students

"I was very gratified," the teacher said. he was referring to the effect of collaborative learning. The respective contributions of individuals complemented each other. "The end product of their group work was very impressive." "In one group there is a freshman who is very young and relatively quiet, but she became the grammar consultant for the other members. And there's a sophomore who started the class proclaiming that she didn't like literature but ended up surprising herself very often with creative ideas for the project." "What pleases me most is that they really tried to do everything in Spanish; when one couldn't get his idea across, someone else was usually able to help him out." In fact, the "helping-each-other-out" phenomenon is exactly what Donato (1994) would call "collective scaffolding."

As mentioned earlier, collaborative tasks are not always helpful to students. One student's remarks highlight this issue. "I didn't like working in groups in high school," the student explained, "because we always had to do grammar exercises in pairs." The tasks were "dry." "It was boring and nobody wanted to participate." In such an interaction, the goal set by the teacher is one to which the students can barely relate. In addition, the relationship between participants is superficially contracted. They are not "bonded" together to reach a collectively established goal. The student's remarks reflect the importance of "meaningful interaction" provided by a meaningful activity. "In this class we really got to know each other." One student added that the first projects "was really hard, but we all had fun doing it. I guess that was because we knew what to do and why we were doing it." She points to the essence of Activity Theory. Only when learners are able to relate to a task meaningfully is the participation authentic; this is because participants establish goals for themselves. Together all participants form a community of learning, and social dialogic interaction within the community is meaningful and authentic.

For the task to be meaningful to the learners, it should be contextualized with culture and implemented with language. This is the founda-

tion of the Whole Language philosophy. The students also reflected upon this approach. "It's not easy; in fact, it was intimidating at first, but it's more interesting to learn (Spanish) now, because we learn more, not just the language, but the culture, too. It's interesting to know there are other ways of looking at things." In essence, it is the inclusion of culture that contextualizes language learning and learning activities. In doing so, language learning takes place within an authentic cultural context through meaningful interaction within the community of learning.

Conclusion

Interactionists have recognized the contribution that the social dimension has to offer language learning. However, not all group work creates equally "meaningful" interaction. As Kinginger (unpublished) and Hall (1996) have demonstrated, unauthentic interaction generates inauthenic, if not ridiculous, discourse. In such cases, students are offered little assistance toward the development of what is needed for L2 (second language) Interaction competence outside the classroom. "At its worst, extended participation in such a practice could facilitate the development of L2 interactional incompetence" (Hall, 1996:23). By contrast, the two projects presented here adhere to the Whole Language philosophy and it is hoped that they serve as meaningful blueprints for meaningful interaction. Interaction, thus, is originated in meaningful problem-solving tasks where learners are language users of a whole community aiming at a common global goal.

The use of ethnographic techniques (observation, interview, filed notes, and report) is appropriate for study of socially interactive language. Such techniques allow students to learn experientially, to reflect, to conceptualize abstractly, and to experiment (Hashemipour, 1995; Byram, 1989). In addition, as learners are expected to produce a culturally and linguistically appropriate play, practice and development of four language skills are incorporated in the model of "language learner as ethnographer." Since, learners are responsible for authentic culture description, the process of searching the materials will be like that of an ethnographer doing the fieldwork. Essentially, the two projects are grounded in a sociocultural approach toward language learning withing the broad scope of cultural embeddednesss.

NOTES

1. According to Canale and Swain, grammatical competence is concerned with the mastery of lexical items, phonology, morphology, syntax and literal meaning. Sociolinguistic competence refers to the mastery of appropriate language use in different sociolinguistic context. Discourse competence indicates the ability to combine and interpret forms and meanings to achieve a unified spoken or written text. Strategic competence is revealed by one's strategies, verbal or non-verbal, to compensate for communicative breakdowns and to enhance communicative effectiveness.

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